

(**Note:** This is the first of a series featuring each of the 11 Underground Railroad sites in Oswego County that have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.)

May 8, 2002

Bristol Hill Church Receives National Recognition



The Oswego County Freedom Trail Commission successfully nominated Bristol Hill Church in Volney as one of the Underground Railroad sites to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Pictured from left are Pastor Jim Hinman of Bristol Hill Church; Judith Wellman, professor emerita of history, Oswego State University; Terry Prior, director of the Oswego County Historical Society; Helen Breitbeck, Heritage Foundation of Oswego County; and Barbara Dix, Oswego County Historian.

The Bristol Hill Congregational United Church of Christ in Volney was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and on the National Park Service's National Network to Freedom in 2001.

Established in 1812, this church had both black and white members, many of whom were active in the Underground Railroad, sheltering slaves looking for freedom in the northern states or in Canada.

Parishioner Millie Burton wrote a poem about the church, which begins:

“Over a hundred years ago upon this very sod,

A band of fearless people built a house to worship God.”

African-American James W. Seward joined Bristol Hill Church May 15, 1831.

Seward received an education from Gilbert Mills Academy, then traveled to Ohio to educate other African-Americans. In 1839, he was kidnapped in New Orleans. Oswego County abolitionists wrote letters for his release. They were successful in setting him free. However, in 1841 he was hanged for robbery and murder in St. Louis with three other African-Americans.

Before going to the gallows, Seward wrote a letter to abolitionist Gerrit Smith. In it, he reaffirmed his commitment to his “abolitions opinions” and his “Calvinistic belief.”

He wrote:

“Do not I beseech you my dear sit (nor) think on me harshly, think any way of me rather than the cool and deliberate villain (sic) and midnight assassin which some would represent. In all my trials, troubles, and sorrow, I enjoy a comfort and pleasure by trusting in God. I feel today that I know that my redeemer liveth and because he lives I shall live also. Adieu forever. When you receive this James will be in another and better world.”

A copy of the letter remains at the church.

“The church is proud of its ancestors who stood up for what was right in the face of the sin of slavery,” said Pastor Jim Hinman.

The existing structure was constructed between 1832 and 1836, and incorporates original wainscoting, windows and carved lintels.

Bristol Hill Church is located on the north side of State Route 3, east of Fulton.
For more information on the Oswego County Underground Railroad sites, contact
Barbara Dix, Oswego county Historian, at 349-8460 or 1-800-596-3200, ext. 8460.